The Character and Role of the Virtuoso at War

To be a genius is to be an exception. Great men and women of genius not only defy the deleterious proclivities of human nature, but also bring into harmony the positive qualities that are needed for success. Clausewitz calls the military genius a virtuoso by merit of this composition of parts into a harmonious whole. The military genius is more than a warrior king who orders material forces into order, however. In Clausewitz’s ideal, the military genius is a martial philosopher-king. The exploits of the great military leaders of antiquity – Pericles, Alexander, Caesar – and the great kings and emperors of Clausewitz’s time – Frederick the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Gustavus Adolphus – provide examples of what can be accomplished through the successful implementation of genius in war. Clausewitz’s military genius is the leader that brings together the “harmonious combination of elements,” both martial and intellectual, in order to succeed as a charismatic force in military engagement (B1: p44).

Character stands as necessary before all other considerations in the definition of a military genius. The virtuoso is not complete without the appropriate mental activity, courage, emotional energy, and temperament needed for military success. Clausewitz stresses the importance of intellectual ability as the basis for any kind of genius. “. . . ‘genius’ refers to a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation” (B1: p44). The mind of the military genius is characterized by resolve and intentional determination. Clausewitz writes, “. . . the mind tells man that boldness is required, and thus gives direction to his will” (B1: p48). Bold resolve and a will directed toward determination come before exceptional brilliance. While both are needed, a strong presence of mind comes first. “. . . determination proceeds from a special type of mind, from a strong rather than a brilliant one” (B1: p48). Later on Clausewitz comments on the need for both, however, when he writes, “Whether [‘presence of mind’] is due to a special cast of mind or to steady nerves depends on the nature of the incident, but neither can
ever be entirely lacking” (B1: p49). He makes very clear that a brilliant mind may be inappropriately swayed by strong emotions where a strong mind will not falter in a moment of desperation:

... some men of outstanding intellect do lose their self-control; it could be argued that a powerful rather than a capricious mind is what is needed. But it might be closer to the truth to assume that the faculty known as self-control – the gift of keeping calm even under the greatest stress – is rooted in temperament. ... The [emotional] counterweight [against uncontrollable passion] we mean is simply the sense of human dignity, the noblest pride and deepest need of all: the urge to act rationally at all times. Therefore we would argue that a strong character is one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions. (B1: p51-2)

This concept of steadfast determination in light of great stress and pressure directly relates to Clausewitz’s concept of courage.

Due to the dangerous nature of war, courage is the first requisite aspect of character. However, courage in the face of immediate danger to oneself flows from the even keel of a mind tempered by the will inclined towards rational action. Clausewitz describes the courage needed by the military genius as “a compound of” two kinds of courage (B1: p46). He writes that courage can be of a negative cast, characterized by permanent indifference through experience with the brutality of war, or an additive nature, essentially motivational in the light of pressing circumstances and ambition (B1: p45). The military genius rises to the occasion of immediate danger with the ambition for glory and honor, while holding close the resistance to cowardice and nervousness so often imposed by a lack of familiarity with warfare. While the negative form of this courage serves as the basis for military genius, the positive form acts as an energizer, for it is emotionally motivational.

Only emotion can act as a fuel for the great strength of energy that is necessary in war. Clausewitz writes, “Energy in action varies in proportion to the strength of its motive, whether the motive be the result of intellectual conviction or of emotion. Great strength, however, is not easily produced where there is no emotion” (B1: p50). Clausewitz goes on to elaborate on this emotion as derivative from an ambition for glory and honor, and he writes that “... we may well ask whether history has ever known
a great general who was not ambitious; whether, indeed, such a figure is conceivable” (B1: p51). This emotion is not far from the strong mental capacity that is needed in genius, however. Clausewitz asserts that “. . . intelligence helps sustain endurance,” which is necessary in the context of a full campaign (B1: p51). Additionally, being rooted in the enduring strength of intelligence enables the military genius to maintain the necessary balance of temperament for the execution of strategy.

Clausewitz applauds the “men who are difficult to move but have strong feelings” as having the particular temperament necessary to “clear away the enormous burdens that obstruct activity in war” (B1: p53). The emotions of these men are hard to move, being rooted as they are in calm rationale, but this trait is indicative of strength beyond intellectual brilliance and emotional fervor. Clausewitz writes, “. . . strength of character does not consist solely in having powerful feelings, but in maintaining one’s balance in spite of them” (B1: p53). The possession of self-control and balance empowers the military genius to wade through the “psychological fog” of war that descends upon those in the midst of battle (B1: p54). With the stimuli of a battle and the barrage of new ideas and contradictory intelligence coming at him in the midst of an engagement, the successful commander will stay calm, rooted as he is in his self-control. This calmness in the face of danger is integral to success, for, as Clausewitz writes, “. . . no degree of calm can provide enough protection [for one’s convictions] . . .” when assaulted by the demands of battle (B1: p54).

The threat of obstinacy is ever on the horizon for the confident leader, who must, by necessity, be rooted with integrity in the plan that he has laid out. Clausewitz is careful to point out that obstinacy is an emotional issue – “a fault of temperament” – and not a problem with the intellectual capacity of the genius (B1: p55). “Obstinacy is not an intellectual defect; it comes from reluctance to admit that one is wrong” (B1: p55). Clausewitz relates this problem of temperament with emotion by merit of the instinctually emotional discharge that characterizes it. The leader is seen to be obstinate when he “objects instinctively” to critique or opinions other than his own (B1: p55). He is not vain – he does not merely enforce an appearance of what he desires to be true. Rather, he demands that things are as he envisions them, and that he cannot be wrong, despite the greatest evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the military
genius may be tempted to reject any possibility of his own fallibility, and he must guard himself against this temptation.

Clausewitz does not merely characterize the character of the military genius. He also elaborates on the role of the military genius as the martial philosopher-king. The military genius must be a statesman as well as a general, be comfortable as the planner and executer of his country’s grand strategy, and address the problems incurred by friction successfully. Clausewitz reserves the title of ‘genius’ for the leaders that have excelled in the highest positions of the military, and have achieved peace through their “thorough grasp of national policy” (B1: p59). The object of war is always political, and thus the perpetrators of war must have a firm grasp on what those political ends are in order to execute the war in adherence to the aims of policy. Clausewitz points out that the very waging of war is incredibly political, even though much of the evidence of this is dissolved at the conclusion of the war, like “scaffolding to be demolished when the building is complete” (B1: p60).

Clausewitz makes very clear that the connection between the military genius as statesman and the state which he serves is one in which he must present the truth in such a way as to arouse the emotions. “Truth in itself is rarely sufficient to make men act. . . . The most powerful springs of action in men lie in his emotions” (B1: p60). Later in his writing, Clausewitz explicates the demoralizing effect of a state that comes up against an enemy with greater fervor and will, and the demoralizing effect this can have on the people of the former group. He writes, “Woe to the government, which, relying on half-hearted politics and a shackled military policy, meets a foe who, like the untamed elements, knows no law other than his own power!” (B3: p155). There is an explicit acknowledgement of the difference that energy, derived from the emotions, makes upon a war effort. It is also clear that he believes that this emotional force stems, at least in part, from the political atmosphere of the nation, which is set by the martial philosopher-king.

The military genius is also responsible for the prevention of friction when at all possible, and the alleviation of the pain that occurs from unavoidable stress. Friction is that element of war that makes the “apparently simple” difficult to execute (B1: p68). Clausewitz repeats this theme throughout On War, and
writes, “Knowledge in war is very simple, being concerned with so few subjects, and only with their final results at that. But this does not make its application easy” (B2: p96). The solution for problems incurred by friction lies not in the knowledge that the military genius has, but rather in his ability to foster a healthy military spirit and take victories whenever possible. Through an “iron will-power,” the military genius can “pulverize every obstacle,” even if it means compromising the military machine – at least in the short-term (B2: p66). Clausewitz attests that by learning by experience with his army, the military genius can strengthen his forces against friction, and prevent trivial occurrences of it. Going further, this concept of strength against friction by way of an iron will relates to Clausewitz’s later point about the strength of the “military spirit” as a catalyst for “refinement of base ore into precious metal,” illustrating through metaphor the effects military spirit has on the military (B3: p146). Where the military genius needs to have an iron will, his forces must be inspired with the military spirit to proceed.

As the grand strategist of military operations, the virtuoso at war must have a command of knowledge that makes it as second nature for him. He is also responsible as the creative source of engagements and battles. Clausewitz writes, “... talent and genius operate outside the rules, and theory conflicts with practice. . . . At [the] level [of supreme commander], almost all solutions must be left to imaginative intellect” (B2: 89). With a multitude of problems before him, the military genius must allow his creative brilliance to come to bear on situations and decision-making. Finally, the genius as grand strategist is responsible for defining the aim of war in accordance with national policy, maintaining control of operations at all times, assuring victory as proof of his genius, and knowing the limitations of his forces, and acting within them. The greatest example of this restraint is found in the life of Frederick the Great, who pursued his ambitious goal with limited resources, but only ever doing just what was called for to achieve them and nothing more (B3: p 135).

A true demonstration of military genius leaves nothing out. It lacks neither emotional force nor calm rationale in the many capacities that it is called to operate within. The virtuoso at war must ensure unity of purpose and harmony of talents in the execution of the successful war effort. He must compose a martial masterpiece by unifying in himself a balance of all the necessary parts.